



# General Assembly

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## Fifty-fifth session

Items 119 and 123 of the preliminary list\*

## Programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001

### Pattern of conferences

## Remote interpretation

### Report of the Secretary-General

1. The present report is submitted in response to requests made by the General Assembly in its resolution 54/248 of 23 December 1999, the Committee on Conferences<sup>1</sup> and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions.<sup>2</sup> It covers developments in the field of remote interpretation following the circulation of the report prepared in 1999 (A/54/176).

2. The 1999 report was considered by the Committee on Conferences in August 1999. During its consideration, the view was expressed that the report should be considered to be preliminary. Emphasis was placed on the need to involve interpreters in the development of the new system, as the physical and psychological well-being of interpreters was directly related to their performance on the job. The Committee adopted a conclusion in which it "commended the efforts of the Secretariat to develop a system of remote interpretation and looked forward to additional experiments in the future. The Committee requested the Secretariat to further refine the cost considerations of remote interpretation, taking into account not only technological possibilities but also the cost benefits of remote interpretation, including the relative cost advantages of the different conference centres that

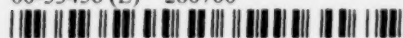
were likely providers of remote interpretation services, and to report thereon."<sup>3</sup>

3. Later, the General Assembly also considered the question on the basis of the report of the Secretary-General and the report of the Committee on Conferences. On 23 December 1999, the Assembly adopted resolution 54/248, in which it decided that in the absence of an Assembly decision to the contrary, the use of remote interpretation should not constitute an alternative to the current institutionalized system of interpretation and that the use of remote interpretation should not affect the quality of interpretation or in itself lead to any further reduction in language posts, nor would it affect the equal treatment of the six official languages. The Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to keep under review the introduction and use of any new technology, in particular remote interpretation, and to report thereon to the Assembly on a regular basis.

4. All activities already undertaken or foreseen are in agreement with the framework established by the General Assembly. Nothing is done during the experiments that could jeopardize the ability to provide total-quality services equally in all six languages. Only communications systems capable of transmitting high-quality sound and image are used. Cost implications of remote interpretation would be determined based on

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\* A/55/50.



the use of such high-quality communications. Furthermore, there is no linkage between remote interpretation and the number of language posts. Any possible financial advantage of remote interpretation will probably be connected with economies in travel and subsistence allowance costs. Likewise, the proposed medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005<sup>4</sup> views remote interpretation as a complement, rather than as an alternative, to on-site services.

5. In the 1999 report of the Secretary-General, it had been announced that an experiment involving the servicing from Geneva of a full-scale intergovernmental meeting, with six languages, to be held at Nairobi, would take place as early as possible in 2000. The selection of the duty stations involved in the experiment was based on the availability of interpretation staff and vacant conference rooms equipped with interpretation booths at Geneva, as well as the possibility of enhancing the use of existing meeting facilities at Nairobi, where no permanent interpreters were posted.

6. The Geneva-Nairobi experiment was intended to build on the results achieved by the Vienna-Geneva experiment and to gather missing information on relevant technical, financial and human resources issues. To actually accomplish this, the experiment had to be conducted under conditions as identical as possible to those prevailing during a typical session of an intergovernmental body. It also had to provide data on the sustainability of remote interpretation over several consecutive days, both in technical and in human resources terms.

7. Pursuant to the consideration of the meetings programme for 2000 at Nairobi, which included only a few weeks of meetings with interpretation in six languages, as well as the substantive and organizational characteristics of different sessions, their political sensitivity and the views of substantive secretariats, it was decided that the first substantive session of the Commission on Human Settlements acting as the Preparatory Committee for the special session of the General Assembly for an overall review and appraisal of the implementation of the Habitat Agenda, to be held from 8 to 12 May 2000, would be selected for the experiment.

8. While the Vienna-Geneva test had been conducted using integrated services digital network (ISDN) lines for the transmission of both sound and

image, the Geneva-Nairobi experiment would require the use of satellite services to emulate ISDN lines, which are not available in Kenya. In order to determine accurately the relevant technical requirements, including equipment, and agree on organizational arrangements, a survey of the facilities and services available at Nairobi was conducted by three staff members from the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna who had been instrumental in organizing the 1999 Vienna-Geneva experiment. They visited the United Nations Office at Nairobi from 10 to 13 January 2000.

9. They concluded that remote interpretation from Geneva for a Nairobi meeting would be possible if adequate telecommunications infrastructure emulating ISDN lines was available. The Mercure satellite connection between Nairobi and Leuk, in Switzerland, made available to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) by the European Space Agency (ESA), offered the best alternative, but it needed to be upgraded with additional bandwidth to ensure sound and image transmissions of sufficient quality for interpretation purposes, without disrupting other existing services. The additional capacity could be leased from commercial satellite services. Other improvements in telephone lines at both ends and purchases or rental of videoconference and communications equipment were also necessary. In addition, some components used in the Vienna-Geneva experiment would have to be shipped on loan from Vienna to Nairobi.

10. The total cost of the necessary telecommunications upgrades and equipment was estimated at about \$290,000. The experiment would have also required the customary assignment to the United Nations Office at Nairobi of a full team of interpreters in order to have the necessary back-up in case of disruptions in the communications or malfunctioning of the equipment. An important cost component was accounted for by six modems which, it was hoped, could be provided on loan by ESA, since they were assumed to be readily available to ESA. Contrary to original assumptions, the Electronic Services Division at the United Nations Office at Geneva determined that there would not be an opportunity to use any component of the equipment to be bought for the experiment in communications projects of a different nature. After repeated attempts, it also proved impossible to secure the loan of the six

modems, whose cost would have amounted to \$120,000. *Notes*

11. Before implementing other steps and making financial commitments, it was necessary to ascertain that the telecommunications set-up being considered would interface properly with the interpretation system at Nairobi. A connectivity test using equipment available at Vienna was scheduled for the last week in January. Delays in shipping and the need to use additional materials not available locally made it necessary to reschedule the test, which was conducted on 10 March with positive results.

12. At that stage, it was no longer viable to purchase the modems that ESA had been expected to lend, since delivery time, according to the suppliers, was in the order of three months. The only alternative was to reconfigure the Mercure network links at Arendal (Norway), Leuk and Nairobi, as a one-time arrangement. This would still need considerable lead time.

13. By 14 March, it was concluded that making substantial financial commitments and embarking on further technical and staffing preparations were not prudent. If there was a slippage of just a few days in any activity, as had happened with the connectivity tests, considerable resources would have been spent and the technical set-up would not have been in place for the experiment to take place between 8 and 12 May. With no other meeting at Nairobi suitable for the experiment coming up, preparations were suspended.

14. In a related development, in December 1999, the General Assembly decided that a full-fledged interpretation service should be established at Nairobi by 1 January 2001. This decision has changed drastically one of the basic considerations that had led to the design of the cancelled experiment, namely, the relative availability of interpreters in different conference centres. In view of the likely schedule of meetings at each location, if an experiment involving Nairobi is to be conducted in the future, it should perhaps consist in servicing from Nairobi a meeting held at either Geneva or Vienna. Consideration will be given to setting up an experiment at a time when a full team of interpreters is available at Nairobi.

<sup>1</sup> See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 32 (A/54/32)*, paras. 53 and 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, *Supplement No. 7 (A/54/7)*, chap. II, para. I.34.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, *Supplement No. 32 (A/54/32)*, para. 61.

<sup>4</sup> A/55/6 (Prog. 6), para. 6.19.